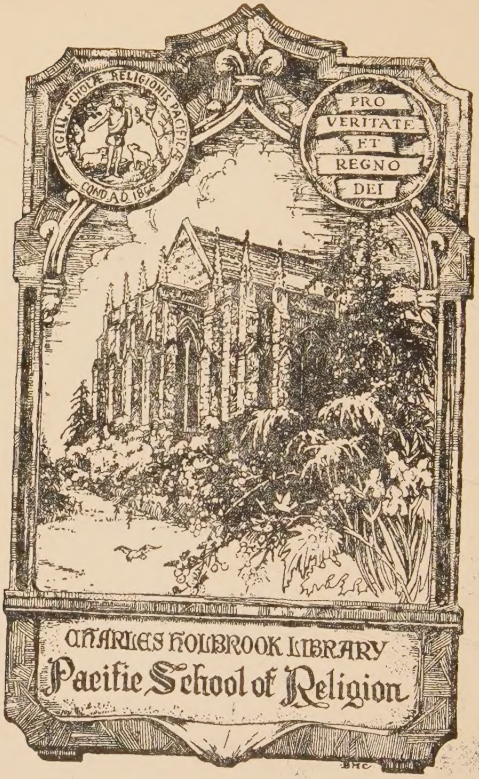
Jesus of Nazareth in the Light of Jewish and Christian Thought and History

BY

SAMUEL H. GOLDENSON

BM
620
G52
1926
GTU
Storage



Gift of
Holland Burr
In Memory of

JESUS OF NAZARETH IN THE LIGHT *of* JEWISH *and* CHRISTIAN THOUGHT *and* HISTORY

A SUNDAY LECTURE

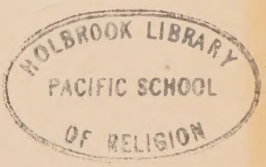
DELIVERED JANUARY 10, 1926,

by

SAMUEL H. GOLDENSON, PH. D., D.H.L.

before the

RODEF SHALOM CONGREGATION



PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA
1926

71967

E521
G566j

BM
620
G52
1926

232.9
G

JESUS OF NAZARETH IN THE LIGHT *of* JEWISH *and* CHRISTIAN THOUGHT *and* HISTORY

THE stir and confusion in the Jewish and Christian world caused by a recent sermon on "A Jew's View of Jesus" by Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, testifies, above all, to the great difficulty in making oneself understood on this subject. And the reason is not far to seek; for there is no theme so delicate as the place of the Nazarene in a world of Jewish and Christian contacts and interrelations.

For nineteen hundred years Jesus of Nazareth has been the center of the deepest, the most searching, the most persistent, and the most heroic controversy that the world has known. This controversy has tried men's souls more than any other recorded in history, because the things about which it has revolved have to do with life and destiny, with the nature of God and man's relation to him, with conceptions of human society, and with the place of a people—the Children of Israel—in the spiritual economy of mankind.

Moreover, the depth and the delicacy and the searching qualities of this controversy have not been

HOLBROOK LIBRARY
PACIFIC SCHOOL
OF RELIGION

limited to the importance and the magnitude of the issues involved, but have been profoundly shaped and determined by tragic events and untold suffering experienced from the very moment that these differences were perceived. The world records many a difference touching the nature of life, the universe, and the supernatural order; but nowhere have these differences been so strongly held, so passionately defended, and so sacrificially adhered to. In the Greek world, as everyone knows, there were schools of thought dealing with the selfsame problems; that is, nature, God, the moral law, and immortality. But for the most part these problems remained academic and dialectical—a matter for discussion. But the differences that arose nineteen hundred years ago in ancient Galilee and Judea could not be confined to easy-chair discussion or to a peripatetic debate. The reason is to be found in the temperament, the history, and the training of a people.

Temperamentally, the children of Israel were profoundly earnest. No one who reads the Scriptures can escape the conviction that the people who could face the issues of life with such courage, who could lay bare their shortcomings, failures, and convictions with such frankness, who could avow supreme and transcendental ideals with so much single-mindedness—I say no one can read this autobiography of a people without coming to the conviction

that this people was exceedingly earnest. In earnestness lies the secret of achievement, of heroism, of sacrifice, of idealism, of martyrdom. An idea becomes a living force in the world not merely by its intrinsic worth but by the manner in which men hold it and subject themselves to it.

In the economy of the spiritual life of mankind, Israel's temperamental earnestness, coupled with a genius for moral insight, caused it to regard its history as especially significant and purposive. From the earliest of days, our people began to interpret the facts of life and the career of their folk in terms of spiritual destiny. It was this predilection for moral and spiritual values that made them feel that they had a special office in the economy of human well-being. From Abraham to Malachai, from Malachai to Hillel, we find the selfsame consciousness of playing a profoundly serious role in the business of moralizing life and interpreting the will of the Infinite.

And out of this temperamental quality of Israel, together with his unique preoccupation with things spiritual, there naturally developed a discipline of life in which all things and all experiences became religiously significant. This fact made the religion of Israel not only a dominant concern, but one that touched the life of the individual almost at every moment and in every situation. It is only in the light of a people possessing such a temperament,

having such a spiritual career, and subjecting themselves to such a discipline, that the original controversy can be understood.

Jewish history did not end with the first century of the Christian Era; and it did not end precisely because the Jewish people were temperamentally too serious-minded and morally so disciplined as not only to be able to endure, but to feel that they had an obligation to persevere in life and to bear witness to those truths and ideals which their prophets and their history had taught them. It is in this very will to persevere and to endure that we find the supreme tragedy and glory of Israel, when we view it in its own light; but seen from the standpoint of the religion that gradually developed with Jesus of Nazareth as the central figure, the continuance of the Jew has been his supreme sin and the mark of his utter incapacity to appreciate the highest boon ever offered mankind, the boon of eternal salvation. Small wonder then that the theological differences touching the nature of Jesus and the teachings of and about him became aggravated in the course of time into mutual hostility and caused so much suffering and sorrow; for just as, on the part of the Children of Israel, their attachment to their inherited and traditional way of life led them to resist with all their might doctrines that were alien to their spirit, so those who developed the new doctrine, or became converted to it, championed it with

equal zeal. It is important to understand that there is no zeal so strong as that felt by those who are responsible for a doctrine or are recent converts to it. The very antagonism, moreover, that was early engendered by the zealots on both sides found literary expression, and in the very book that was destined to become the religious source book and guide to millions upon millions of people. Here then, anti-Jewishness became part and parcel and of the very structure of what was styled "the new dispensation". In accordance with the new doctrine, Israel was blind, stubborn, faithless, and a persistent hindrance to the realization of the divine promise of salvation. Such being the nature of Israel as conceived by the new theology, the people of the old and superseded dispensation could claim no rights in a world governed by the sanctions of the new covenant. When the new religion became the religion of the Western world, Israel became an outcast among the nations and the accursed among men.

Besides the antagonism to Israel that developed on the basis of his rejection of the new doctrine, arising directly or indirectly as a result of the life and teachings of Jesus, is the fact that Christianity in the course of time became the state church. As the church of the Roman state, it was quite natural that it should assimilate unto itself some of the points of view and ideals of Roman political life. In a word, Christianity began to take over the im-

perialistic ideas that had determined Roman political thinking for generations and centuries. Not only, then, did the missionary zeal of the followers of Jesus account for antagonism to the Jew, but also the imperialistic conception of the growing church. Subsequent history is but an extension and an aggravation of the early conflict between Jew and Christian, a conflict unhappily that has always been associated on both sides with the name of Jesus of Nazareth. To Israel, this age-old controversy has meant dispersion, persecution, inquisitions, blood-accusations, the yellow badge, the Crusades, massacres, pogroms, the fiery cross, anti-Semitism. To the Christian, the persistence of Israel has meant a sense of failure, leading to an ever-renewed hope that the Jew might change his ways and be brought to see the light, that "the new dispensation" might be vindicated, and that the suffering of the Master should not have been in vain.

It is from the standpoint of the history of this controversy that we can understand why an utterance of a rabbi even at this late day should be so readily misunderstood by both Jew and Christian. The misunderstanding may be explained very simply by excessive fear on the Jewish side and excessive hope on the Christian; so that when a group of my ultra-orthodox Jewish colleagues learned that a noted rabbi made certain pronouncements that were favorable to the nature and teachings of Jesus, they

at once saw in it a danger to their people. Who, with any knowledge of human nature, can doubt that the reaction of the rabbis was as much psychologically emotional as intellectually theological. What spoke in and through them was the age-long memory of suffering and martyrdom endured as a consequence of the doctrines promulgated in the name of the Nazarene; while, on the other hand, these same pronouncements of the rabbi, particularly because of his national prominence, were seized upon by our Christian friends as a sign of the eventual, if not the near, fulfillment of the age-old hope. In the language of one of the ablest of the Protestant clergy, the position that was ascribed by the newspapers to Dr. Wise with reference to Jesus was to be regarded as a *"bud not to be disturbed."* The hope is that the bud would soon grow to full fruition and the end of the nineteen-hundred-year-old controversy would be at hand, when Israel will have accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

It is interesting to note that in most of the newspaper reports of the sermon given by Dr. Wise the phrase "accept Jesus," or "accept his teachings," or "accept Christianity" is used. In the history of this whole controversy between Jew and Christian, the differences revolve about the idea of *acceptance* and *rejection.* To the Christian mind, Israel's great sin has been the rejection of the new doctrine. The unquenchable hope of Christians has been that the Jew

will one day accept the new faith. It is quite natural and inevitable, therefore, that the terms "accept" or "acceptance" be found ready to hand for newspaper headlines.

I know not whether it is necessary at this late day in the history of western civilization to recite once more why it is that Israel has refused from the very beginning and throughout his long and martyred history to accept the new doctrine. But lest there may be confusion in the minds of some, engendered by the recent episode, it may be well to mention a few of the essential differences between Jewish and Christian religious doctrines. Certain it is, that the differences are not at all rooted in the question whether Jesus was a man or a myth. In the first place, the vast majority of Jews from the first century on, did not doubt that such a person actually lived, about whom, if not through whom, the so-called New Dispensation developed. And secondly, it would have made very little difference to them whether he really did or did not exist, inasmuch as what actually determined the differences between them and the Christian world had to do with the specific beliefs and doctrines connected with his name; for whether Jesus lived or did not live did not affect the central Christian doctrine as a doctrine: namely, that a person bearing that name was conceived to be not only a Messiah, but one who was more than human, and in some unique way

shared the divine nature—as the Son of God. It is this conception that the Children of Israel, then as well as now, have not been able to accept. Had this doctrine not developed, it is highly doubtful whether this whole controversy would have arisen, for the ethical teachings of Jesus are found for the most part in the Old Testament and in the contemporary Jewish writings.

True it is that the emphasis that Jesus lays is primarily upon the inward side of the spiritual life. But these teachings are not new or revolutionary in the history of Jewish religious thinking. In the fifty-first Psalm, for example, there is an inwardness of religious emotion, a searching quality of spiritual introspection that has never been surpassed. The emphasis on the "broken and contrite heart" as a preparation for acceptability in the sight of the Lord is made both by Isaiah and by the Psalmist. It is not, therefore, those teachings of the Nazarene that have to do with ethical conduct or character that form the basis of the difference between Jew and Christian, but rather the place that Jesus himself holds as a character in the drama of the spiritual life of mankind. To the mind of Israel, religious values, the approach to God and acceptability in His sight, have to do with the moral law, as something to live by. If there is any mediation between the finite and the infinite, between man and his God, it is through obedience to the will of God, con-

ceived to be embodied in the moral law. Not by way of the recognition of a man as a Messiah, or as a personal sacrifice to be a means of salvation, does man achieve merit in the sight of God, but rather through "doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly" with Him. When the Psalmist asks: "Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in His holy place," he does not answer, "He who accepts certain doctrines"; but rather, "He who has clean hands and a pure heart" —that is, he whose outward conduct is right and whose inward self is attuned to spiritual truth and reality.

We do not deny, of course, that the acceptance of Christian doctrine carries with it the prerequisite of a good life; but what is contrary to Judaism is the two-fold mediation of Jesus—on the one hand he stands between God and the moral law, and on the other between God and all the rest of His children. The characteristic approach of the Old Testament teachers is always as humble exponents of the law, as champions of what is true and just and fair, without interposing their individual wills or claims. But in the doctrinal parts of the New Testament, Jesus is represented as being in some way the master of the moral law and the key to spiritual well-being and to heavenly bliss.

From this supreme difference others follow. Judaism, stressing conduct predicated upon the

moral law, is interested not only in the life of the individual soul, but in the welfare of the community, in the social aspects of human behavior. In Christianity, the stress tends to be upon the acceptance of a doctrine, as is indicated by the name itself, which means to believe in Jesus as the *anointed of God* and the Saviour. When the acceptance of a doctrine is a primary consideration, the tendency naturally is to stress belief, which is more or less personal.

There is another important difference between Judaism and Christianity, and this also has to do with the place of Jesus in the scheme of spiritual things; that is, that the primary concern of Judaism is with the conditions of life here on earth. The passion for righteousness which is associated with the Prophets of Israel is the central expression of the genius of our religion, and the righteousness that is taught by Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah has to do with the actualities of life and with making life happy, abundant, expansive, and satisfying. Not for the sake of a certain status in the world beyond does Judaism enjoin righteousness, but because life demands it and because man is the child of the God of Life.

In Christianity, however, where the dominant thought is salvation, the ethical and spiritual emphasis tends to be in the direction of an after-world. The birth of Christianity is linked up directly with

eschatological thinking, with ideas concerning the end of things and the world beyond. In the New Testament there is a constant iteration of the "New Kingdom" that is at hand or nearly at hand, and the necessity to prepare for it—the place of the Master at the right hand of God and of his disciples who are to inherit the kingdom. In Judaism, too, there is thought of the hereafter and the belief in immortality, but these are certainly not in the foreground of our religious convictions, and do not dominate ethical conduct and thought.

And now, what of the future? How long is this controversy to continue, and under what conditions will there be an abatement of the heat thereof? Can Jew and Christian come together upon some common ground and live in mutual respect and helpfulness? We answer without hesitation in the affirmative. With Carlyle we utter, "the everlasting yea." It is unthinkable that a way of unity and understanding should not be found.

But my conviction is not predicated on pious wishes or abstruse and far-off notions, but rather upon observation of the actualities of life in the present-day world. And there is no better point of departure for the discussion of the reason of my faith in the possibility of mutual understanding between Jew and Christian than to refer to this present synagogue service. In this congregation this morning there are a number of Christians, and out-

side of this Temple there may be thousands who are listening on the radio to this discussion of the place of Jesus in Jewish and Christian history. The importance and significance of this fact cannot be overestimated. It is almost inconceivable that a hundred or two hundred years ago, not to speak of an earlier time, a rabbi in Israel would have dared to speak with so much freedom and frankness, and that Christians would have listened with so much understanding and tolerance. The explanation of this circumstance is to be found in the social forces, cultural ideals, political principles, and scientific methods of thinking that obtain in the world today. As I speak, I find myself supported and protected by principles of freedom of thought and expression, and by a conception of democracy which stresses intrinsic worth and which aims to secure to every individual the right to have his say in the councils of life.

Democracy means mutuality. It is a faith in man as man, and particularly in his capacity to redirect and to right himself concerning the purposes and the problems of the common life. It is evident, therefore, that at the root of democracy lie moral and spiritual ideas, and that these form a common platform upon which Jew and Christian can stand and from which they can collaborate in the work of the world. Moreover, out of this very association of Jew and Christian in behalf of such common causes as public health and morals, social

justice and international peace, springs that kind of understanding that in the course of time affects the manner in which they conceive their respective inherited religions. Once you meet a man and find him subject to the same experiences of life, capable of similar reactions to the forces of life, imbued with a like spirit of altruism and service, from that moment on it is impossible to shut him out from the Kingdom of Heaven, from divine grace and favor. Life is richer than any creed. Its forces break through the finalities of creed and dogma. The supreme hope in the world today is to be found in the growing appreciation of the fact that in the last analysis life itself must be consulted, and only on the basis of the actualities that obtain in the living world should one make his pronouncements regarding the value of particular conceptions and purposes of men and peoples.

Aside from the influence that the so-called secular ideals and principles exert upon man in the development of mutual understanding, the coming together of Jew and Christian is being hastened by the tendency on the part of both to select out of the complexity of their respective religions those elements that are clearly of higher ethical and spiritual worth. Every religion is a composite entity into which have entered many and diverse elements drawn from many minds and many experiences: all the constituent parts of one's religious history,

traditions and conceptions are not on the same level of moral and religious value. It is quite conceivable to read one's Judaism in such manner as to engender within oneself a spirit of exclusiveness, division, and close-mindedness, an emphasis on the external qualities of the ceremonial law, a spirit and emphasis more or less determined by excessive racial and nationalistic bias, and as a result one's capacity for comprehensive sympathy and imaginative understanding becomes limited. There is on the other hand, a way of conceiving Judaism that cannot but make for unity and harmony, for the moralization and consecration of the whole of life. When Micah inquires "What does the Lord require of thee?", he rises to the supreme heights of religious conception and obligation, and the answer that comes to him is in terms of that which cannot but be universally approved—"To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."

As with Judaism, so with Christianity. There is a way of reading the New Testament that leads one to fixed and final doctrines of human worth and destiny. Out of such conceptions arises a spirit of exclusiveness, bitterness, anti-Semitism. On the basis of such thinking the inquisition and many a persecution, not only of the Jew, but of Christian sects, have been justified.

There is, however, a way of reading the New Testament as to find oneself stirred to generous

thinking, to humility, to a love of understanding, to a passion for forgiveness, and to a readiness to enter into sympathetic relationship with the lowliest of God's creatures. Who that reads the New Testament with any degree of freedom is unable to find at least two types of person bearing the name of the Nazarene? There is one that is inextricably bound up with a theological metaphysics, which is fixed, unalterable, and absolute. There is another Jesus who is humane, humble, calm, gentle, who loves children, the lowly, and the meek of the earth, even as did the prophet Jeremiah of old.

The coming together of Jew and Christian, then, will be when each will learn the nobler lessons of his own scriptures in such a manner as to lead to mutual respect of each other's loyalties and convictions and to a capacity to work together for those common causes that bless mankind and glorify Him who is the Father of us all.

GTU Library
2400 Ridge Road
Berkeley, CA 94709
For renewals call (510) 649-2500

All items are subject to recall.